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Silliness of the spy game

Now that evidence of US efforts to bug the Soviet embassy in Washington has reminded everyone that the United States has been trying to do to the Russians what the Russians have been trying to do to us, the current espionage frenzy is bound to subside.

Presumably it will be replaced by an analysis of what went wrong in the American security system in Moscow, how much damage was done and how to prevent a recurrence. Eventually it might even lead to a recognition both in Moscow and Washington that this kind of espionage is a dated, silly game played by adults who don't want to grow up.

What actually happened in Moscow — apart from the fact that some Marine guards had affairs and permitted some level of security lapse — is still unclear. If the Marines allowed unauthorized people into the Embassy even once, to use the men's room, it would be a security lapse. If they let them in repeatedly or gave them the free run of the building or opened the way into the most sensitive areas — all of which has been implied by official statements — that would be shocking and possibly grave.

Initially the tone of official statements conveyed the impression that investigators had solid evidence at the most alarming and damning end of the scale. As days passed however, more frequent reference was made to "worst case assumptions."

Worst-case assumptions are always used by military and intelligence officials to assess the other side's intent and capabilities on the sensible principle that if the worst is assumed from the start, there can be no surprises. Eventually however such assumptions need to be filtered through judgment. When policy-makers are driven by worst case assumptions, they become committed to paranoid policies.

Apart from the issue of the degree of access the Marine guards gave to the Soviets, there is the question of what the Russians may have achieved as a result. One account has implied that the Marine lapse enabled the KGB to identify a network of US agents and liquidate them. If so, the loss is not only grave but tragic, yet that seems improbable.

Embassies are unlikely to keep military secrets or lists of agents lying around, and CIA staffers in the political section are unlikely to chat about them at the water cooler. Most of the discussion that passes for secret in an embassy is analysis of goings on in the host country;

events, articles that appear in the press, political trends. However irritating it is to think that the Russians may be listening to what US officials think about them, the most plausible casualties that might result from such would be deaths from embarrassment. If agents were actually betrayed and executed, the lapses by their handlers within the embassy must have been more shocking than those of the Marines.

William Maynes, a former officer in the US embassy in Moscow who later served as assistant secretary of state and now edits the journal Foreign Policy, is among the knowledgeable people who are skeptical of the worst-case allegations, although he notes one troubling possibility. Innocent sources, who are not spies but merely ordinary Russian people, with whom diplomats come into contact in the process of watching Soviet society, are not protected with the level of secrecy that envelops agents.

Conceivably, as happened after the fall of the embassy in Iran, such contacts could be identified and tarred for their association with foreigners. If the policy of "glasnost" were, for example, to be reversed and replaced with a future Soviet version of McCarthyism, Russians who ventured forth in the current atmosphere of openness might suffer later.

In his briefing Wednesday Secretary of State Shultz said US officials are "damned upset . . . We're upset at them, and we're upset at ourselves." That draws attention to the management of US personnel, which in this era of flawed management style is where attention belongs.

Shultz also addressed the larger issue of US-Soviet relations. Despite the disruption, he said, it is important to "press on" with diplomacy. Yet gratuitous espionage, which is a throwback to the Cold War and readily exploited by opponents of arms control and detente, makes diplomacy difficult.

Shultz said he intends to make the point in Moscow that the Soviet government cannot expect to create a "hostile environment" for American diplomats overseas without risking damage to important mutual interests. His was a fair assessment, putting responsibility for embassy security at home and responsibility for the US-Soviet relationship on both nations, whose common need is to put away such childish things as bugs and cloaks and daggers.

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